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THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

BY JAMES HENRY BREASTED

In those American universities in which oriental studies are represented by a staff large enough to form a department we find the orientalist everywhere organized, like the departments of Latin and Greek, to teach languages. In view of the evident insufficiency of such an organization, it is extraordinary that since the early days of Johns Hopkins University, where it first appeared, it should have persisted to the present day. For while every oriental department must obviously teach languages, it is equally obvious that productive orientalists must also share in the great task of recovering a whole group of lost civilizations, the very civilizations, moreover, from which our own is ultimately descended.

The recognition of this fact at once involves the orientalist in obligations reaching far beyond the classroom and the seminar. These obligations have never been so evident as during the last few months, when the ancient lands of Western Asia, where civilization and the great world-religions were born, have been emancipated from the tyranny of the Turk, and for the first time since the rise of modern science have been rendered safe and accessible to research and investigation. Here and in Northeastern Africa lie the unexplored areas of history. The study of these lands is the birthright and the sacred legacy of all civilized peoples. Their delivery from the Turk brings to us an opportunity such as the world has never seen before and will never see again. In so far, moreover, as the financially overburdened governments of Europe may feel themselves obliged to curtail their former subventions for research in the Orient, the opportunity and the obligation is correspondingly greater for us in America.

It is evident that the opening of Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Babylonia to modern business and to enlightened exploitation in mining, railroad-building, manufactures, and

especially agriculture with its great irrigation projects, means the rapid destruction of the great ruined cities and buried records of early man with which these lands are filled. Only a few years ago the imposing records of the earliest mining enterprises known, stately sculptures on the rocks in the mineral-bearing valleys of Sinai, some of them *the oldest historical monuments inscribed by man*, were brutally wrecked and destroyed by the foremen and workmen of a modern mining company endeavoring to restore and exploit the old mines of the region. This kind of thing will soon be going on throughout the Near East.

To these destructive forces must be added those of natural decay, native vandalism, and illicit excavation for profit by natives. The disintegrating forces of rain, wind-driven sand (a natural sand blast), freshets, and inundations, chemical agencies in the earth and often within the ancient objects themselves—all these and many other natural forces carry on a steady and uninterrupted work of destruction which is appallingly evident when one compares a photograph of a monument taken today with one taken ten or fifteen years ago.

The modern natives are much too ignorant to feel any respect or reverence for the venerable associations among which they live, and a vast amount of destruction is constantly going on at their hands without any conscious purpose to destroy on their part. At Napata, the capital of ancient Ethiopia, I found the natives taking out the masonry from the temple of King Tirhaka (the Ethiopian adversary of Sennacherib) in order to secure blocks of stone to lay over the bodies of their dead in the neighboring modern cemetery. They had been doing this for generations. The buildings on the fringes of the mound covering the great Syrian city of Kadesh on the Orontes have long been going block by block to feed the neighboring limekilns of the natives; and chapters recounting such destruction all over the ancient lands of the Near East might be indefinitely multiplied.

The presence of increasing crowds of tourists in normal times, and the periodic visits of museum representatives, have long since brought forth an evil generation of native antiquity dealers whose shops are largely replenished by illicit digging. Native excavation

for profit has so increased that its destructive work is now going on throughout the entire Near East. Even if the "antikas" found by such plunderers are purchased by museums, much of their value has been lost for lack of the field data furnishing the entire milieu in the midst of which each object was found, and often dating it for us. Indeed the milieu as a whole is often of greater scientific value than the returns from all the scattered individual objects taken out of it. Often, however, the objects found are bought by tourists and are then usually lost to science. To these losses of the actual objects taken out of such excavations must be added the incalculable destruction wrought by the ignorant native diggers, who destroy more than they find.

In out-of-the-way villages and remote districts where the inhabitants may still be unaware of the value of "antikas," documents of priceless value knock about for months or years and then perish. In many such cases the camera of the visiting archaeologist might have made a record of the document in a few minutes, even if he was unable to buy it; or an hour's work would have produced a copy of it in his notebook. An Egyptian villager who felt obligated to Reisner brought to his camp as a gift (which Reisner afterward fittingly rewarded) a papyrus roll which had been lying on a shelf in the native's hut for years. It turned out to be an ancient Egyptian book of medicine, one of the most valuable documents in the early history of the art.

Similarly there are still little known or rarely visited sites of ancient cities where even a preliminary examination may result in saving priceless records. One cannot but recall that at the Hittite capital of Khatti (Asia Minor) Winckler, on one of his first walks about the place, kicked out with his boot heel documents from the royal archives of the Hittite foreign office which were lying only a few inches below the surface. Wagonloads of royal records lay just below. The result was the discovery of materials which have made possible the decipherment of the lost Hittite language.

Even in American or European hands, however, the monuments of the Near East do not always become available to science. In the house of an American educator in Syria there has been lying for years a series of Phoenician sarcophagi of sculptured stone,

still unpublished, unknown to science, and receiving no attention. While no censure or blame may attach to the owner under such circumstances, this cannot be said of archaeological expeditions, and especially of museums which conduct extensive excavations and collect great bodies of monuments and records, of which no report or publication is laid before the scientific world. Many hundred packing boxes filled with Egyptian antiquities wandered from excavations on the Nile to one of the well-known museums of Europe during the decade before the Great War. No account of these monuments or of the excavations which produced them has appeared in print or is likely ever to be published. It should be said, however, that even the most conscientious museum authorities cannot always command the assistance or the means for rendering their collections promptly available in published form. There is therefore a vast and ever-growing body of unpublished records in the museums, chiefly in Europe. Such materials are as unknown and as inaccessible to the orientalist of America as the monuments still buried in the East.

Besides these written records and archaeological remains, many of which are sufficiently portable to be transported to the museums of the West, there is a vast body of fact observable only in the various habitats of the leading civilizations of the ancient Near East. The systematic collection of these observations has hardly begun. This will be evident when we recall that the wild ancestor of our domestic wheat was discovered in Palestine as late as 1906. Surveys by a considerable group of natural scientists will be required to furnish us with exhaustive maps of the present distribution of plants, animals, and minerals in Western Asia and Northeastern Africa. At the same time extensive studies of the surface geology will be necessary throughout the same region in order to furnish the materials which will enable the paleobotanist and paleontologist to give us a full catalogue of the plants and animals of the Near Eastern world in remote prehistoric times, when savage man was still engaged in the long struggle which was to lead him to the threshold of earliest civilization. The meteorological history of the region also needs much further investigation. We shall then possess the facts from which we can reconstruct the natural environment of

prehistoric man in this region, without which we cannot trace his subsequent career and his rise to civilization.

Here, then, is a large and comprehensive task—the systematic collection of the facts from the monuments, from the written records, and from the physical habitat, and the organization of these facts into a great body of historical archives. The scattered fragments of man's story have never been brought together by anyone. Yet they must be brought together by some efficient organization and collected under one roof before the historian can draw out of them and reveal to modern man the story of his own career. The most important missing chapters in that story, the ones which will reveal to us the earliest transition from the savagery of the prehistoric hunter to the social and ethical development of the earliest civilized communities of our own cultural ancestors—these are the lost chapters of the human career which such a body of organized materials from the Near East will enable us to recover.

Attached to a department organized exclusively to teach languages, bound down by an inflexible teaching program, and without financial resources, the university teacher, as I need hardly point out, is as totally helpless single-handed to cope with a situation like this as would be the astronomer whose time and strength were absorbed by the classroom while he endeavored to study the skies without his staff or his observatory. The astronomer is sometimes required to visit distant regions in order to make his observations. From what has already been said it is evident that this is constantly true of the orientalist, who desires to be not only a philologist but also an ancient historian. To secure his materials he must be granted the time and the funds to become a frequent ambassador-at-large to the Near East. In this way the records resulting from a collecting activity covering many years might be brought together at one place. Photographs, journals, notebooks, drawings, maps, and surveys might rescue large numbers of perishing records and monuments. If an assistant methodically guided could be permanently in the field, even without extensive excavations, the records collected would rapidly grow into a comprehensive group of documents.

Housed in their own building, such a methodically collected and growing mass of data would eventually become a body of historical archives, a focus and clearing house for the correlation of all the prehistoric life as well as the various civilizations grouped around the eastern end of the Mediterranean and at least as far east as Persia. The final result would be a systematically built-up documentary basis, such as exists nowhere else, for recovering the lost chapters in the career of man. Working side by side, each in his own room in a historical laboratory like this, the members of an oriental department would soon find themselves becoming far more than teachers of languages.

Just as the astronomical observatory requires a staff of assistants for the care of its photographs, records, and files of observations and computations, so this proposed historical laboratory, which may properly be called an Oriental Institute, would need a staff of helpers to keep the files in order, to arrange, accession, and catalogue the various and growing body of materials and documents. Such a staff might also devote a great deal of time to organizing in classified catalogues the large body of materials already accessible in published form but still unassimilated. The work of this group of assistants would enable the members of the department as a coherent research staff to maintain a constant general survey and control of the available sources. A dark room with a permanent staff photographer in charge, and the assistance of a draftsman, likewise permanently attached, would enable the research staff to publish the results of their work promptly and in a form satisfying modern technical requirements.

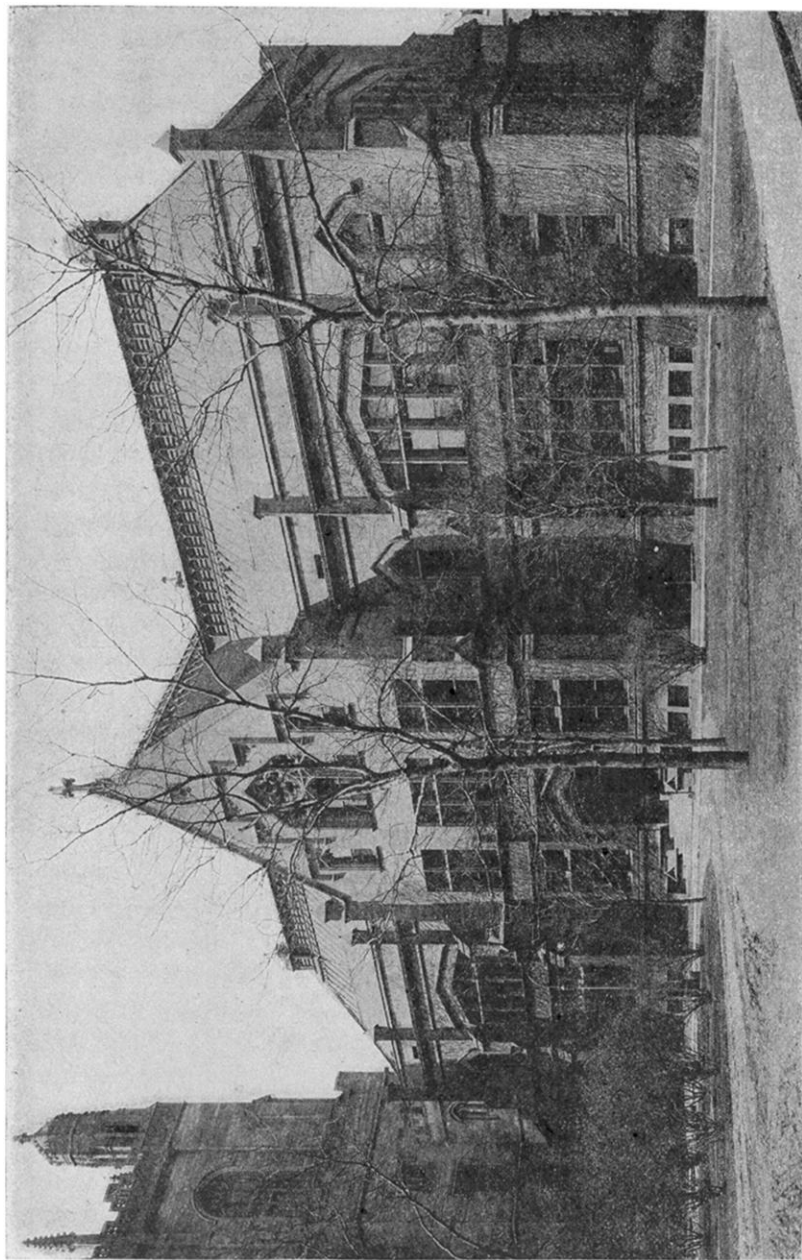
A brief presentation of the foregoing plans and possibilities, having met with the sympathetic co-operation of President Judson and the Trustees of the University of Chicago, it has so appealed to the interest of Mr. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., that he has generously contributed an annual income of ten thousand dollars in order to set going the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. It will be housed in Haskell Oriental Museum, where the space now used by the Divinity School will be shortly vacated when the coming Divinity Building is ready. This will free the entire museum building for the purposes of oriental research; but in so far

as the present available space will allow, the Institute will be organized and will begin its work at once.

Summarized briefly, the purpose of this organization will be to trace as fully as possible the rise of man from Stone Age savagery through successive stages of advance, the emergence of civilization, the history of the earliest great civilized states, and the transmission to Europe of the fundamentals of civilization which we have since inherited. In short, the ultimate aim of such work must be the production of a comprehensive history of the origin and development of civilization. The present writer and his colleagues in the Department of Oriental Languages realize that this is an ambitious program and a high ideal. In any case we venture the hope that the organization may eventually be able to furnish the most considerable body of organized materials as yet available for building up such a history, even if the large and comprehensive synthesis constituting the history itself should never be given literary form and expression.

While the Institute does not yet purpose carrying on costly excavation campaigns, and as is evident could not do so on its own present budget, it is anticipated that the frequent presence of its representatives in the Near Orient may result in furnishing information of favorable opportunities or the discovery of promising sites for excavation to which the attention of American museums or interested patrons could be called. It would be possible in this way for the Institute to extend its operations, and thus by the use of special donations to undertake excavations at points pressingly or suddenly requiring attention. For example, in excavating the sea road along the foot of the Lebanon range the Turks have destroyed extensive ancient remains. At such a juncture an institution which might step in and make proper records or carry on supplementary excavations would save much from complete destruction.

The Institute also expects to urge the importance of epigraphic surveys to save the vast body of written documents now perishing *in situ*. It cannot be too often emphasized that an inscribed monument still standing or lying *in situ* is subjected to many natural forces of decay and therefore, even when it is not suffering from vandalism,



HASKELL ORIENTAL MUSEUM, THE HOME OF THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE AT THE UNIVERSITY
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is *inevitably undergoing slow destruction*. To the great task of forming a documentary corpus which will save this priceless heritage of perishing records of the past the Institute will therefore give much attention.

This is the first generation of orientalists who have been aided by the possession of highly perfected mechanical appliances for recording and multiplying graphic reproductions on an extensive scale, especially the various applications of artificial illumination, and of photography and photo-engraving so reinforced. For the portable storage battery has now made it possible for the first time to direct a brilliant light on interior wall surfaces for any length of time and to control completely the direction of the stream of light. Never before, therefore, has it been so feasible to undertake the immense task of making a permanent and multiplied record of all the written monuments of the past in the Near East. It is therefore one of the great and sacred obligations resting upon the orientalists of this generation to undertake this task, which if properly equipped and supported could be completed in a relatively short space of time.

Finally the Institute hopes to correlate its work with that of other groups of orientalists. It would seem the obvious part of wisdom, as I had the opportunity of saying at the recent Philadelphia meeting of the American Oriental Society,¹ that the strategic points of attack should be so distributed as to avoid duplication and to insure a systematically organized advance all along the line. The Institute will be glad to hear of the work of other men and organizations and to discuss efforts at co-operation. Should it be so fortunate as to expand its archives and files of documents beyond the abilities of its staff to cope with them, it will be ready to discuss with colleagues in other institutions who may be in need of materials the possibility of assigning a body of documents to some one outside its staff for study and publication. It hopes that its archives may become a clearing house accessible under the proper conditions to all, and a common home of oriental science, especially to the orientalists of the West.

¹ Presidential address, "The Place of the Near East in the Career of Man and the Coming Task of the Orientalist," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, July, 1919.